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AUTHOR Lee, Briant Hamor
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ABSTRACT

"Style" in theatrical production may be defined as a working, developing consensus, a meeting of the minds of a disparate group of artists who make up a full production crew. Some strategies for the use of "style" in production are as follows: (1) allow for the individual imagination and creativity of each member of the production group: (2) ask group members to commit themselves to having a free and open meeting of the minds, unfettered by questionable terms: (3) meet and agree on principles of selectivity, range of latitude, tasks as perceived for the production, and strategies to be employed: (4) agree to a common commitment in the production: (5) do everything to maintain open and free communication so that agreements remain common and valid: (6) put on the performance: and (7) analyze and share what has been accomplished. (AEA)

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Strategies for the Use of "Style" in Production*

BRIANT HAMOR LEE, Ph.D., Bowling Green State University (Ohio)

The basic problem which I shall be considering is one which any theatre artist/practitioner is constantly concerned with: How to approach and achieve 'style' in production. My attempt will be both theoretical and pragmatic. The theatre historian/critic is best equipt to deal with problems of 'style' once the production has opened; this is not my concern here. Nor will I deal with what a 'style' may be called during the production process, a period when terms are most tenuous, at best. My concern is with 'style' as a working, developing, consensus, a meeting and greeting of the minds of the disparate artists who make up the full production group. Unless you run a one-person theatre program (in which case you argue these problems with yourself), the production process involves several highly talented, highly trained, specialized artists - each wanting/ demanding to make valid and meaningful contributions to the production.

Consider the individuals in that group: Director, Designers (scenic, lights, costumes, properties, sound), Musicians (music director, composer, performers), Movement Director (Choreographer), and dramaturg. Let us consider their areas of specialization and training, i.e. their areas of specific expertise in 'style'. Those who deal with the visual elements of the production: the designers-are trained in and deal with Art 'styles", i.e. Fine

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Art - painting, drawing, design, sculpture, architecture, and all of the elements of scenography. The 'style' training and 'style' definition brought by these individuals to the production process comes from the Fine Arts. The areas of Fine Art 'styles' and Fine Art historical 'styles', though in many respects as nebulous as those of theatre, are an older discipline critically and theoretically than ours, and therefore should be dealt with as primary authority. Those who deal with the aural elements of the production: the musicians - are trained in and deal with Music 'styles'. The areas of music 'styles' and musicological 'styles', also, are older disciplines, both critically and theoretically, and, also, must be dealt with as primary authority. This area would include movement and dance aesthetics. Those who deal with the historical elements of the production: the dramaturgs - are trained in and deal with all of the elements of historical 'period' and historiological terms, i.e. 'style' (but in a different sense of the word). History is a well defined and systematically organized discipline. Then, there are those who deal with the most ephemoral elements of production: directors - coordinating each of the above mentioned branches of 'style' into that composite which, after-the-fact, is identified by critics and theatre historians as some one of the 'ill-defined' theatrical 'styles.'

Due to the nature of the process of the correlation of these art forms which is theatre and one of its greatest strengths, as well as one of its greatest potential weaknesses,

I would like to propose some basic assumptions upon which to develope a working approach to using 'style' in production. First, similar 'style' terms in different art forms are not and should not be considered to be synonymous. Even within the best defined art forms the terms vary from practitioner to practitioner, from language to language, and from period to period. Second, the other art forms (music, fine art, dance, history) have already obtained a high degree of systematization in their use of 'style' terms, indigenous to the particular form. Therefore, we must either accept our need to correlate these disparate 'styles' or devise a strong new language of our own and enforce its use.

In the best of worlds, we should forge ahead and attempt to develope or synthesize a new language for the aesthetics of theatrical 'styles.' In the real world of having a show about to go into rehearsal: How does one deal with this problem? Again, in that best of worlds, one would hope to have a Dramaturg available to function as source-person for the correlation of all of these different and disparate 'styles'. But, Dramaturgs are few and for many a luxury outside of the budget. What does one then do?

Working through the total production process, I will make some comments and suggestions, which may aid in this problem. To begin with, recognize the background and training of the individuals involved in the production process. Each person in the group is an expert in their own area of specialization.

Often these areas of expertise and authority are abrogated for the wrong reasons. All members of the production group must be involved from the start. This common start will avoid the problem of different members of the group developing at different stages of the process of determining how the production will be. If the entire group of people involved, is involved from the start then an organic whole will more likely result. If one of the ways to define 'style' in a production is a sense of ensemble in all of the parts of that production, then all of the parts of the production group must be involved and evolve from the beginning.

So many of us are trained in more than one area of theatre that it is often difficult to keep from solving another's problems gratuitously. This is an example of the abrogation of expertise and/or authority which I alluded to above. This is not to infer that no person should make suggestions concerning the area of another, theatre production is before-all-else a group effort. But in the generative stages of production development, the stimulous for creative solution of mutual problems demands mutual respect and giving. Later, in the process of developing and tightening the production, decisions will and must be made, which is the province of the director. The point is that in the earliest stages of the development of the production concept - a free, open, and completely unfettered exchange of ideas will lead to a meeting of minds and a unification of purpose.

In the generative stages of production, terms for 'styles' are only useful in a vague and general way. Each person involved speaks from the basics of their background, training,and knowledge in a free and open creative process. That they may communicate in their own terms is perfectly acceptable, as long as the others in the production group understand that they speak as much to themselves (to air their thoughts) as to communicate with the group.

In one of the areas of cognitive developmental reasoning, commonly called: "Brain-storming," the primary rounds of idea gathering are done without judgement, freely, openly, merely to lay as many potentially relevant ideas on the table as possible. Later, in going through the ideas layed out, further definition and exploration of ideas (and terms) is delved into. But still without judgement. Much later, critical and judgemental values enter into the selection process, after a solid meeting of minds has been achieved.

At one point in the production process there is typically a diffussion of the production group which can lead to a dilution of intent and a loss of gained ensemble. I speak of the period when the director casts and goes into rehearsal, the designers disappear into their shops, and the musicians into their rehearsal studios. It is at this point in the production process that many vital decisions are made <u>in camera</u> by the individual artists without adequate communion with the rest of the group.

The communication process which is established and re-established each time a particular group of theatre artists does a production demands continual effort to be maintained through this middle period of the production process. Decisions must be made and, too often while working alone, are made without adequate respect for their effect upon the other elements of the production. The time and effort put into maintaining open channels of communication at this point in the production is well worth the lack of surprises and conflicts which might occur later in the process.

There is little need to discuss the problems of the production 'end-game' of technical and dress rehearsals, as the roles of the individuals involved are well delineated in almost any theatrical textbook. Beyond a certain degree of polish, most of the elements which make a production's 'style' have been established by this time in the process. I will suggest that a vital additional step must be added to the theatrical production process, especially in educational theatre: The Post-Production Analysis.

It is safe to say that a session of 'Monday Morning Quarterbacking,' or late night 'aesthetic' discussions (over beers after the strike of the show) are not the places for a rational, non-defensive, exploratory meeting of the minds of the production group. Given a short period of time for rest, both physical and psychological, a meeting at which the following rules pertained would be most useful for the members of the group.

The meeting would serve to explore what had really been acomplished. The rules would include: However the production has turned out, the group, as a group, is responsible. Therefore individual recriminations, accusations, ego-building, and the like are not acceptable behavior at this meeting. Perhaps an outside, dis-associated moderator (like a psychologist) would be most useful. Such a person would lead the discussion and maintain the rules.

What happens at this meeting? The group would determine what 'style' had been achieved. Not in the narrow sense which has been the stricture which we are attempting to avoid, but in the sense of 'style' as Gross has suggested. [1] Was there an agreed upon principle of selectivity? Was the range of lattitude appropriate? Were the tasks as perceived for the production recongized and achieved? Did the strategies employed work? Were the choices thus made executed?

In answering these questions do we come close to providing enough material to define 'style' for that particular production? Perhaps answering the questions will provide us with a series of insights into the process which will let us at least comment upon such matters as: consistency of approach and execution, ensemble, unity (whatever that means), and overall effect (attempted and achieved).

There is another responsibility incumbant on such a group meeting: a commitment to share the results of that particular

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[1] Roger Gross,"A Theoretical Approach to a Definition of Style," presented at the American Theatre Association Conference, San Diego, California, October 10, 1980, as a part of the panel,"Style: A Useless Term Made Useful."

group experience with others. The educational benefits of disarming honesty with our students would be excellent. The openness of frank critical discussion with our colleagues would be provacative and refreshing. The evident maturity of our self-criticism would add to the legitimacy of our artistic endeavors on the college/university campus.

Another part of such mature self-criticism would be the sharing of the results of the process with peers at other institutions. How that is done will have to be determined elsewhere, but the results of the pooled information would allow us to begin to attempt to identify some "new" 'style.' It would provide sufficient accumulated experience to deal with rationalizing the functions of that "new" 'style' and thus to interpret a theatrical work.

Thus my strategies for the use of 'style' in production may be simply stated as follows: Allow for the individual imagination and creativity of each member of the production group. Commit yourselves to making a free and open meeting of the minds, unfettered by 'questionable' terms. Having met and agreed on your principles of selectivity, range of latitude, tasks as perceived for the production, and strategies to be employed; having agreed to a common commitment in the production, then do everything to maintain open and free communication so that the agreements remain common and valid. Get the show on! But then, as importantly as the rest of the process, analyse and share what you have accomplished.

All of which may sound like an over-simplification, but consider that the benefits of such a free and open, organic approach to production genesis, development and analysis. Thus, the systematic retreval of the results would allow for the future determining of a perhaps truer aesthetic language of 'style' in theatre.

This study is possible because of a meeting of minds and an open exchange of ideas, opinions, arguments, and biases during a series of seminars led at Bowling Green State University and through involvement in over 100 productions in my professional career. I am particularly indebted to a number of itinerant (jogging) discussions held with my student: George White.

This paper was presented as a part of the Panel:"Style, A Useless Term Made Useful," at the American Theatre Association Conference, held at San Diego, California, August 10, 1980. Other participants in the panel were: Dr. Alan Woods, Ohio State University and Dr. Roger Gross, The University of Arkansas,Fayetteville.